
Title: Matt's Tale Vol. III

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From a nearby hilltop a stranger called out, "Hail! Hallo! Fine shot there, good sir! A most fine shot!" The stranger proceeded to ride down the face of the hill and was joined from behind with what seemed to be a hunting party. As they drew closer, Maxim could see that they number about half a score and that the party was made up equally of warriors and wizards. The warriors were suited in the finest agapite and verite armour, and they were armed with the highest quality weapons. Their armour and weapons were dressed up with brightly colored sashes and streamers. The mages wore vibrantly colored robes and odd, tall hats; some of them had painted faces or were marked with strange tatoos. The loud stranger brandished a beautiful, gold halberd, the finely honed edge of which seemed to have never seen combat. The stranger continued: "Outstanding arrow placement, sir! You truly are a master of the bow, good man! A person of your talents would be of great service to our party as we pursue our quest! Will you join us?" Maxim brighten a bit, "A quest? Towards what great cause do you sally forth?"

"A Queen of the Solen has tasked us with destroying her rivals so that she may reign unquestioned. She has promised us many great gifts for accomplishing this deed," the stranger replied and proceeded to describe rare, magic bags, powders and balls of crystal.

Spur looked towards the ground, "So, if I am to understand you correctly, you plan to enter the sovereign colony of the solens, slay their queens in their own throne rooms and then collect a reward of magic trinkets?" The stranger nodded excitedly. "This sounds more of the soiled acts of mercenaries and assassins than that of virtuous quest seekers. Of what danger are these solen to you?" Maxim asked. "Are they attacking your towns, destroying your farms, threatening the citizens? I have slain this creature here only in that it wandered too close to my vendor tower and became aggressive towards my customers. These solen are quiet, lowly beasts that toil only to collect the smelly fungus they so greatly cherish. Who are you to interlope with their affairs?"

"But think of the rewards!" the stranger retorted, "They have incredible powers!"

"These items seem to only have value to the goldmonger and beastmaster," Maxim replied, "of which I am neither. I have no use for these gains, nor for

your venture."

"No use? You can sell them for outrageous profits!" the stranger quipped, "Stock your store with solen articles and harvest the riches. Are you to say you have no need for wealth?"

"My shop is stocked in accordance to my customers needs, " explained Maxim.

"Bah!" coughed the stranger, "Stay here then and sell your arrows and bandages and smoked fish. Remember where you are, archer. In this facet of Britannia, the citizenry does not buy what they need, they buy what they want!" Turning to his party, "Come along then, it is time to ride."

The gaudy entourage galloped off into the woods, clanging and clattering like a gypsy wagon. Maxim of Spur called after them, "In the least, good luck! And safe travels!" Soon the last of the bright streamers and banners could no longer be seen through the foliage. The archer took a deep breath and exhaled hard, looking up at the clear, morning sky and pondered these puzzling times. He reached down, recovered his arrows from the insect corpse, and scooped up and bagged the purple fungus. He would give this moldy growth to the blacksmith that was in his hire. The smithy may have some use for it in his explosive hobby of alchemical experimentation. Virginia completed the scrolls she had been asked to scribe and shook her writing hand in an attempt to relieve the

cramps. She tightly rolled the scrolls, secured them with ribbon and set them aside for Master Spur's next business journey. She then seated herself in front of the chest that she was allowed to store her things and hefted open the heavy lid. The young mage hurriedly tugged off the damaged leathers she was wearing and replaced them with mismatched armour pieces that she withdrew from the chest. As she dressed, she grabbed handfuls of various cloves, roots and other reagents and stuffed them inside any loose area within the clothing. She packed her bag with more of the ingredients and added in a few small vials, some jewelry, her books and, of course, apples. Virginia stood and, while hopping on one foot and then the other, tugged on a pair of tight riding boots. Reaching once more into the chest, she took out a moth-holed robe and donned it, smoothing it as much as possible. She closed her eyes and deemed that she was at the stable, and she was there. Virginia claimed her horse, Studebaker, and treated him to the apples she carried. The stablemaster made his usual jokes about her shabby looking horse and its funny name, and he was promptly rewarded for this with the usual small-fisted punch in the chest. Virginia mounted up, rode hard out of town and quickly turned off the road into the forest, as she was in search of more of the large ants she had

encountered before. It did not take long for her to come upon a small group of the creatures in a dense part of the woods. The solens were diligently going about their business of collecting fungus and paid no great mind to the girl as she watched from behind a tangle of bushes. All at once, the insects abruptly stopped what they were doing and paused as if harkening to a silent calling. The solens quickly made off in the same direction through the trees. The girl nudged Studebaker forward and followed the ants at a safe distance until they disappeared into a partially hidden hole in the ground. Caution aside, Virginia followed into the abyss.

The tunnel was engulfed in an impenetrable darkness. She thought of a bright oil lamp, and the cavern was bathed in light. In the brief darkness, she had lost track of the solen workers, so she rode down the corridor to try to regain their trail. As she progressed deeper into the colony, many other insects of extraordinary dimensions made themselves known. To avoid confrontation, Virginia quickened her mount's stride and, when it seemed safe, turned from the main passage way into a cave to hide and rest.

From a dark corner of the cave Virginia heard a clicking and ticking she recognized, so she readied herself for defence. Out of the shadows walked a solen of which she had not seen before. Words

of destruction were
poised on Virginia's lips
when she was forced to
suddenly hold up because
she believed she had
heard... the insect speak!
The solen queen carefully
approached the girl and
slowly lowered its ungainly
head to within inches of
the little mage's face. In
almost perfect English,
punctuated occasionally by
clicks of its mandibles,
the royal insect described
a most ambitious and
intriguing plan to Virginia.
Eyes wide, mouth agape,
and swayed by the
queen's eloquence, Virginia
nodded slowly and said,
"Yes, I can do this for
you."

See next book